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AUTHOR Crabbe, David; Hoffmann, Alison; Cotterall, Sara
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ABSTRACT

This document explores problems described by learners of second languages at the university level. It reports on three case studies drawn from a language advisory service at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. An understanding of the range of experiences learners report in a given learning context is likely to shed light on ways in which those learning contexts might be structured for better learning opportunities, or ways in which learners themselves might develop better strategies for making use of the opportunities that are already there. For example, one type of problem identified by the data is a lack of fit between a learner's long term language learning goals and the immediate goals of the course in which they are enrolled. This could be dealt with through a modification of the curriculum or by increased understanding by the learner of how to manage the differing expectations. The problem descriptions were gathered through a series of interviews between individual learners and a language advisor. The focus of this investigation is on three broad questions: (1) In what way are the problems framed through the process of the interview itself? (2) What learning goals are explicitly or implicitly set by or for the learner? and (3) What underlying learner beliefs about language and language learning arise from the interviews? The paper concludes by proposing a framework to use in managing and analyzing dialogues about learning. A main finding is that learners are all guided by some sort of goal. There needs to be better integration of short-term (passing a course) and long-term (using a language for real communication) goals. The basis for any solution lies in making goals central and explicit. (KFT)

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Examining the Discourse of Learner Advisory Sessions

David Crabbe, Alison Hoffmann, Sara Cotterall
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Abstract

The intention of this paper is to explore problems described by learners of a second language at university level. An understanding of the range of experiences that learners report in given learning contexts is likely to shed light on ways in which those learning contexts might be structured for better learning opportunity, or ways in which learners themselves might develop better strategies for making use of the opportunities that are already there. For example, one of the problem types identified in our data is a lack of fit between a learner's long term language learning goals and the immediate goals of the course they are enrolled in. The lack of fit could be dealt with through a modification of the curriculum design or by an increased understanding by the learner of how to manage the differing expectations. In either case, some intervention in the status quo of a particular context would be indicated.

The problem descriptions were gathered through a series of interviews between individual learners and a language advisor. In order to focus our exploration of the problems, we began with three broad questions:

In what way are the problems framed through the process of the interview itself?
What learning goals are explicitly or implicitly set by or for the learner?
What underlying learner beliefs about language learning emerge from the interviews?

The paper concludes by proposing a framework to use in managing and analysing dialogues about learning.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer les problèmes décrits par les apprenants d'une langue étrangère au niveau universitaire. La connaissance de l'étendue des expériences rapportées dans des contextes donnés par les apprenants permettra vraisemblablement de montrer comment on peut structurer ces contextes d'apprentissage ou comment les apprenants eux-mêmes peuvent développer de meilleures stratégies pour tirer parti des occasions déjà existentes. Par exemple, un des problèmes types identifié dans les informations recueillies est un manque d'harmonisation entre les objectifs à long terme de l'apprenant et les objectifs immédiats du cours suivi. Pour pallier à ce manque d'harmonisation, on pourrait modifier le programme, ou encore l'apprenant en langue pourrait améliorer ses techniques pour maîtriser ces attentes divergentes. Dans l'un ou l'autre des cas, un changement est suggéré.

Pour recueillir les données, un conseiller en langues a interrogé individuellement les apprenants. De façon à se concentrer sur l'étude des problèmes, on se pose tout d'abord trois questions d'ordre général:

- comment la procédure d'entrevue elle-même sert de cadre pour aborder les problèmes?
- quels sont les objectifs d'apprentissage explicitement ou implicitement établis par ou pour l'apprenant?

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- qu'est-ce que l'entrevue montre en ce qui concerne les opinions sous-jacentes des apprenants sur l'apprentissage des langues?

Un système pour mener et analyser les entrevues avec les apprenants en langue est proposé dans la conclusion de cet article.

1 Introduction

The intention of this paper is to explore and interpret the language learning task[1] as described by learners of a second language at university level. An understanding of how learners characterise and respond to the task of learning a language in a given context is likely to shed light on ways in which learning opportunities might be enhanced, whether by learners or teachers. For example, one of the issues identified in our data is a lack of fit between a learner's long term language learning goals and the immediate goals of the course they are enrolled in. The lack of fit could be dealt with through a modification of the curriculum design or by an increased understanding by the learner of how to reconcile the differing expectations. In either case, some intervention in the status quo would be indicated.

In this study, the learners' perspectives on the learning task were gathered through a series of interviews between individual learners and a language advisor. In order to focus our exploration of the learning task, we began with three broad questions:

> In what way is any task difficulty framed through the process of the interview itself?
> What learning goals are explicitly or implicitly set by or for the learner?
> What underlying learner beliefs about language learning emerge from the interviews?

These focus questions derive from our own hunches about critical aspects of individual performance in managing the language learning task and from cognition-based models of language learning. The interest in task representation derives from research which shows that finding a solution to a problem requires an accurate and specific representation of the problem[2] (Newell and Simon, 1972). Goal-setting is an established component of motivation theory (Locke and Latham, 1990; Dörnyei, 1998) and beliefs are well-established as underlying influences on action or the lack of it. The three aspects obviously interrelate: the commonality is that they are all concerned ultimately with learning that is managed by a hypothetical learner who has positive and productive beliefs about language and language learning and who is able to represent his or her language learning task in some detail and in a balanced way and to set goals that are realistic and effective motivators of learning.

This paper reports on three case studies drawn from a language advisory service at Victoria University of Wellington. Working from transcribed interviews, it presents excerpts that relate to the questions listed above. The data is not intended to be a full representation of the language learners' experiences. At one level it shows the potential of dialogue about learning; at another level it offers some insight into the three dimensions of the management of language learning which we feel advisory dialogues can usefully explore. What action might be required in a particular case is likely to vary according to the age, sophistication and personality of the learners, as well as the roles they expect and are expected to play in formal education. Nonetheless, we feel that there are generalisations that can be made from this study, particularly concerning the potential of dialogues with learners about language learning and the ways in which such dialogue can be further understood.

Each of the following three sections reports on a dialogue with a separate learner. The first section demonstrates how a problem is framed through a learner-advisor dialogue, driven by the advisor's goal to get the learner to articulate task difficulty as specifically as possible. The following two sections explore two aspects of cognition that are likely to influence learners in the action they take: the goals that they are working towards and the beliefs that underpin their focus of attention.

2 Framing the task

Generally, learners seek an advisory session because they have experienced in their language learning a difficulty that prevents them from performing successfully. They are not always able to analyse or articulate that difficulty. One of the aims of the interview is to help them to do so within a problem-solving framework. This section looks at one interview transcript and summarises the way in which a language learning problem unfolds through the learner-advisor discourse.

An advisor who engages in a dialogue to identify problems and solutions in language leaning is working with at least three assumptions. The first is that an accurate and helpful representation of the problem can be formulated collaboratively from the learner's own reported experience and judgement. The second is that a formulation of the problem will help the learner or the advisor to identify specific tactics that the learner will find personally feasible. The third is that the learner will be able to apply and evaluate those tactics successfully. This rather clinical problem-solution approach can only be seen as an initial framework for action that will be affected by a number of variables both personal and contextual.

The interview is with Clare[3] who is enrolled in a Spanish course. Clare had successfully studied French at School, completed a six-week 'crash course' in Spanish and then spent some time over the summer in South America and `picked up a bit of... the easy kind of stuff'. She then enrolled in a university course in introductory Spanish, which she passed confidently, and so continued to her current course, a more advanced paper in Spanish language.
Clare's opening statement of difficulty in the interview is:

> I'm like completely lost and I don't know what's happening and I mean I've been doing quite a bit of work but I just don't seem to be sort of taking it all in at all, like I've been trying to learn sort of the past tense and the imperfect and stuff and trying to take it in

She makes an unfavourable comparison with her previous, successful experience of learning French, a comparison that is repeated on several occasions. She expresses the belief that Spanish is not a difficult language and says that she is putting in a lot of effort but with no good result. The interviewer (also the writer of this section) takes a problem-solution orientation early in the interview:

> the key to these sorts of things..is..to try.. to work out exactly what the problem is because different problems will lead to different solutions so it'd be good to think, to talk a bit about what's changed

This statement is clearly intended to steer the discourse into a pre-determined framework. The question is to what extent the intention was realised in this case. There is no space here to fully represent the unfolding discourse, but below is a selection of learner statements from the first half of the interview with an indication of the role of the interviewer in prompting these statements.

Statements of problem as they appeared in the discourse

Interviewer's prompts	*Clare's statements of problem*	*Learning tactics raised by Clare*
	I think everything seems to be going a lot faster we've had a lot of people join the class now who obviously learnt spanish before and a lot of them are even finding it boring you know they've learnt all this kind of stuff [ ] I feel after [the introductory course] we don't know enough	
	when I learnt french at school I guess .. there was a lot more interaction I mean I never thought about it before I took the subject but of course it's incredibly hard learning a language in a lecture theatre it's like you know somebody talking at you rather than you actually having a chance to do it yourself	maybe I just need more time to actually practise it like I was reading the thing out there about sort of videos and tapes and stuff there are maybe I just need to come down here and do some of that kind of stuff
	but I'm sure yeah I just not it just doesn't seem to stick so much anymore	
	with our a-v classes we have like on a Thursday morning I'm finding now everybody can express their ideas more than I can [ ] if I'm talking to people I can't express what I'm trying to say	
when you feel you can't express your ideas what do you think it is that you don't have that would enable you to express these ideas	I just I can't think quick enough to be able to I mean first of all I'm thinking in English which is you know something you shouldn't do obviously but um I don't feel I know enough vocabulary I don't feel I know my tenses or my verbs I don't feel I know anything enough [ ] to be able to try and construct a sentence out of it accurately	
and yet you did that in South America presumably	yeah I guess over there I just you know ... I wouldn't know the verb but people would understand you if you just sort of said [ ] people would seem to understand that but [ ] here of course we need to actually know the grammar and stuff [ ] I just seem to know enough to be able to I mean when like when someone talks at me in Spanish they can talk for half an hour and I'll understand it [ ] I just can't seem to respond to it	
okay [ ] let's go back to the expression thing [ ] when you hesitate because you haven't the Spanish flowing out as it were, what is it you're looking for? - is it the vocabulary or [ ] are you hesitating because of the grammatical structure	generally grammatical structure [ ] 'cause if it's vocabulary [ ] I'll know some way to get around it if I don't know the exact word I'll know another word that's similar so yeah it's pretty much the grammar I mean like we're doing a lot of past and imperfect now and I just can't think it fast enough to be able to express it	
[ ] okay so [ ] where does the solution lie, do you think		um I don't know I guess just I just learn the grammar so that I know it well enough to be able to say it [ ]
how much of it is a [ ] affective problem of [ ] not wanting to appear to be the one who knows least in the class for example [ ] is that an issue	yeah I mean I guess it is it's kind of I mean it's stops me from [ ] saying so much I mean I always remember at school in french I was always sort of you know the one in the class who did know everything and who could always answer the questions and stuff so now it's like okay so I'm not that	I was sort of was considering getting maybe a tutor or something so I had someone where it was just sort of one on one where I wasn't feeling worried about everything else where I could just yeah practise it and stuff

	the other day we started talking about how cold it was in Russia and whatever um things just yeah things just come up and I mean like in the um in the classes and stuff I mean I won't not say anything like if they ask me I won't say pass I mean I don't think that's gonna do me any good at all but I just won't stick up my hand and go ooh ooh I'll give it a go	
that's fair representation of the problem [ ] why don't I suggest one or two things that\ come to mind and you can you can tell if they're gonna work 'cause they're just from me [ ]		

The above statements show to some extent how the problem representation is built up, prompted by the interviewer but building on the perceptions of the learner. The initial statement of the learning problem as not being able to 'take things in' is developed into a fuller statement that includes a performance dimension (not being able to express herself), a language control dimension (grammatical patterns and vocabulary) and finally an affective dimension (being a weaker member of the class). This fuller (but by no means full) representation of the problem, together with the three general tactics suggested by Clare, sets a base of shared understanding from which specific tactics are discussed in the second half of the interview (not represented here).

The difficulty that Clare has expressed is in relation to the task of succeeding on the course rather than the bigger task of learning the language. It is hardly surprising that a personal motivation to learn a language is eclipsed temporarily by the need to pass a course. (It is easy for an advisor to overlook this and to be talking at cross-purposes about implicit goals.) Action to achieve the course tasks is likely, therefore, to be more strongly motivated than action relating to personal language learning goals that are to some extent independent of the course. The challenge is to develop a frame of action that integrates the learner's personal motivation and experience with the learning and learning outcomes prescribed by the course in which they are enrolled. It is a hallmark of autonomy that a learner remains in control of their own learning and uses available learning opportunities to serve their own goals. In the context of formal education, they may have two goals - to learn the language to a certain level of proficiency and to pass the course. It is easy for these goals to remain separate. The next section looks at a second case study that illustrates this point.

3 Clarifying goals

Goals are an important motivational force in language learning. In a recent state of the art paper on motivation in language learning, Dörnyei (1998: 120) has explained why:

> [Goals] direct attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities at the expense of activities that are not relevant; they regulate effort expenditure ...; they encourage persistence until the goal is accomplished; they promote the search for relevant action plans or task strategies.

Language learners enrolled in a course will have greater control over their learning if they are clear about the nature of the goals of the language course while at the same time being clear about their own wider language learning goals. The two sets of objectives may not match closely, but ideally course goals should feed into long term personal goals.

Any second language learner has as an objective the development of fluency or accuracy or both. Stern (1990) has used the terms *analytic* and *experiential* as descriptors of these complementary aspects of the language learning task. An analytic learning focus is, according to Stern (1990: 106), essentially attention to accuracy. It is a:

> Focus on aspects of L2, including phonology, grammar, functions, discourse, sociolinguistics; cognitive study of language items (rules and regularities) ...; practice or rehearsal of language items or skill aspects; attention to accuracy and error avoidance.

An experiential focus, on the other hand, is essentially a focus on fluency. Stern (1990: 106) defines it as a focus on:

> Substantive and motivated topic or theme; ... purposeful activity ... not exercises; language ... [which] uses any of the four skills as part of purposeful action; ... priority of meaning transfer and fluency over linguistic error avoidance and accuracy.

Balanced language development, as Skehan (1998) points out, requires an even mix of analytic and experiential language learning focus. Successful learners "balance attention to form and meaning throughout their learning careers. Such learners switch attention judiciously" (1998: 269). The reality is that most formal language learning situations focus on analytic, accuracy focused activities while naturalistic or immersion situations are experiential, with a high priority given to meaning transfer.

The following case study data is taken from an advising session similar in format to the first. The learner's comments illustrate how the course has prompted her to move from a wider experiential focus in accord with her needs in daily life in a foreign country to a much narrower focus on achieving accuracy in the tasks of a course. A language advising interview has the potential to make such shifts of focus salient and to point out the need to maintain balance, if balanced language development is indeed the goal.

Nancy is a first year university student enrolled in an introductory Italian language course. During the advisory session she reveals that she has spent time in Italy and learned Italian by living with an Italian family, interacting with native speakers in daily life and watching Italian television, and has developed a degree of fluency and confidence in interaction with Italian native speakers. Nancy has sought the advice of the language advisor (the writer of this section of the paper) because she is having difficulty meeting the demands of the Italian course for high levels of accuracy, in particular accuracy in matching sound to spelling when doing dictations. She starts by defining the reason for her visit:

> we were going to talk about dictations because I did one this morning [ ] and it went really well [ ] but you see what I did this morning which is not too bad 'cause I've been getting a lot more wrong

She then goes on to describe her problem in more detail.

> I did the first dictation and I got 3.2 out of 5 or something which you know is still a B [ ] so I practised and I did lots of dictations and I tried sounds and I tried to learn my vocab and we had a second dictation and I thought I'd done really well and I was really happy and I got it back and I got exactly the same sort of mark and I was like you know 'cause I've done so much work and I thought I was actually getting better

The interviewer attempts to move the focus from the learner's performance to the nature of the task by suggesting that it may have been a more difficult dictation, but Nancy feels it is her problem.

> I made so many little mistakes [ ] but then again [name of lecturer] says I should be able to hear the different sounds and even if I don't know the words I should be able to spell them

As the data shows, Nancy is concerned about the course requirement that she develop the ability to accurately match sound to written form, and her inability to meet this demand. In contrast she notes her earlier success in communicating despite not being able to spell accurately.

> I used to find it really easy in Italy listening to people talk, that's how I'd pick up the language if they had asked me to spell the words that they were saying there'd be no way I could probably say them quite well and probably get my point across

Nancy is working hard on accuracy in spelling and pronunciation, especially in relation to a new piece of assessment, a reading aloud test, which is about to take place.

> at the moment we are having an oral test and we have to prepare a dialogue - it's out of the book - and I've been going through and through trying to read out some of the words 'cause we have to learn them perfectly but some of them are quite difficult to say [ ] it's where to put the stress sometimes I get confused [ ] and I think I have a lot of problems with the /ye/ sound

Throughout the advising session there is a great deal of talk by the learner about the need for accuracy in spoken and written performance. She seems comfortable with the way the course goals have helped her to see aspects of her learning which she needs to work on.

> I still find that I say things um like I know the words and I know where they've gotta go but sometimes I pronounce them like my o's and my u's and my vowels a little bit like guarded I won't pronounce the o like enough
> [**Interviewer**: is that because you're unsure of whether it's an o or u do you think]
> it could have come from that (laughs) [ ] but I think the biggest problem is between a's and e's

The relevance of accuracy in speaking and writing can be understood in a university language course. But fluency is also an important component of language proficiency. At the end of the interview, in an attempt to bring experiential, fluency goals into focus, the advisor mentions the availability of Italian satellite television. At the mention of television Nancy comments on the role it played in her learning of Italian in Italy.

> oh I used to sit and watch TV in Italy all the time so even if I don't pick up things I usually can get the gist of the story [...] I used to watch Baywatch and it's dubbed in Italian still I kept up with the story

After this reminiscence she switches the topic back to strategies for making vocabulary learning enjoyable (playing memory games, using coloured flip cards, and making vocabulary lists to put on the wall), and repeats an earlier point, namely that language learning at university is very hard work and that she needs to motivate herself with these strategies as she has so much vocabulary to learn. So while Nancy may have begun to learn Italian with a desire to communicate in one form or other, her goals at university seem to have narrowed to meeting the demands of the course. It is hard to explain her current lack of interest in that enjoyable form of fluency practice, television watching, in any other way.

From only one encounter with this learner it is not easy to judge whether her focus on accuracy is a short term matter or a re-orientation in her thinking. To probe this and at the same time to foster autonomy in learners like Nancy, who are facing stringent and high

stakes course demands, it may be helpful to make salient the value of both analytic and experiential activities in the language learning process. The advisor can achieve this not by undermining the value of the course objectives, but by encouraging an informed appreciation of the need to maintain this wider, more balanced focus.

If learners are to manage the balance, they clearly need a schema of action in language learning that includes both components as an integrated approach to learning. Such an integration of fluency and accuracy work is underpinned by a productive set of beliefs about language and language learning. The next section attempts to show how the beliefs about language learning of one learner underpin the way he defines his problem, prioritises goals and selects strategies.

4 Identifying beliefs

The literature on cognitive development identifies two dimensions of metacognition - knowledge about cognition, and the regulation of cognition. Flavell (1987, cited in Wenden, 1998: 517) suggests that beliefs about learning are a component of metacognitive knowledge. Metacognitive knowledge is generally classified into three categories, focusing on the learner, the learning task and the learning process. Flavell (1979) calls these three types of knowledge - person, task and strategic. According to Wenden (1998: 518):

> person knowledge is general knowledge learners have acquired about human factors that facilitate or inhibit learning ... Task knowledge refers to what learners know about the purpose of a task ... the nature of a particular task ... a task's demands ... Strategic knowledge refers to general knowledge about what strategies are, why they are useful, and specific knowledge about when and how to use them.

In what follows, a number of beliefs about language learning, inferred from statements made by the learner, are discussed. In particular, his beliefs about the role of personal factors (person knowledge), the language learning demands of different situations and the role of competing goals (task knowledge), and the usefulness of various strategies (strategic knowledge) are explored.

This interview is with Igor, who, in contrast to the other interviewees, is a non-native speaker of English, and is not currently enrolled in a language course. He is a surgeon from Central Europe who is seeking registration as a doctor in New Zealand. He has attended three English language courses - two at the university - since arriving in New Zealand, but is now working independently on his English, principally by preparing to sit IELTS.

Igor begins the interview by stating:

> um, now I recognise that I lose uh time by time my speaking skills yeah, because after finish my course in university I continue reading, continue listening study [ ] but I don't have good good environment good possibilities for continue my speaking skills

Igor's initial statement of the "problem" focuses on the affective dimension - how to find a "good environment" in which to practise his speaking skills, that is, an environment which meets his personal needs. The language advisor (the writer of this section of the paper) responds by suggesting a number of ways of obtaining speaking practice. Most of these involve seeking interaction with strangers in public settings. However Igor raises objections to these suggestions, referring on a number of occasions to his emotional state (feeling uncomfortable):

> yeah, yeah, but um this talking it's maybe unconvenient to speak with whisper like that, but if people hear that my english is not very good and ah maybe I look a little bit embarrassed

and his social role (study pressure, insufficient time):

> yeah but if I, if I um have um quite free time for my life, but now I feel a little bit uncomfortable for my situation here because I try to take my not my job but I try to study medical books and also now I study for IELTS test, so I don't have much time for .. for finding places many places to speak

We can infer from these statements that Igor believes that people's reactions to his spoken English can inhibit his efforts, and that the competing demands of his long-term (medicine) and short-term (English language) goals make him feel pressured, diverting energy from his language learning. However he mentions two situations where he feels comfortable about speaking English - meetings of local doctors, and meetings of the Theosophical Society. He describes the Theosophical Society meetings in the following way:

> um, quite lucky about that because it's really really interesting topics for me [ ] and um, we have not very many people, we have like a small community, but everybody can go there and uh they are very friendly people and everybody can express personal idea with um very quiet environment and we have a tea time

Clearly this context meets Igor's criteria for a "good environment ... for continue my speaking skills". But what does he believe about the language demands of taking part in such meetings? In both contexts, Igor is likely to be exposed to discussion on familiar, demanding topics expressed in complex language. He describes the issues discussed at the Theosophical Society as "really really interesting", and cites "cardiac surgery" and "political question about ... humanitarian support" as topics discussed at the doctors' meetings. Igor evidently finds it motivating and challenging to discuss such issues. He claims to understand "about 90%" of the discussion at the doctors' meetings, and explains why attending is valuable:

> because it's um my practising understanding medical stuff

However, Igor's input and interaction in English appear to be biased towards a focus on fluency where expressing meaning assumes priority (Skehan, 1998). His interaction could also be said to favour cognitively demanding topics with familiar interlocutors who recognise and acknowledge his status. While this is highly logical in terms of establishing his professional identity, it is not likely to lead to balanced language development. When the advisor attempts to suggest that Igor obtain conversation practice by, for example, talking to strangers on public transport or chatting to staff in public offices, he displays little interest. The advisor then challenges him to analyse the type of input and interaction he needs most, by saying:

> well basically as a GP the most common thing you'll be doing all day every day is this sort of conversation sure you'll be saying where's the pain X, you know but you won't be talking technical language [ ] the most ordinary conversation is what will be your bread and butter as a GP do you understand what I mean

but Igor ignores the advisor's language-focused comment and explains:

> but I don't like to continue my work like a doctor in the GP area because if I could pass um general exams I after that I will try for study surgical skills

This leads us to consider the third area of Igor's beliefs - his goals. Throughout the interview, he talks about his study of English as a means to the end of being recognised as a doctor in New Zealand. Yet his conception of language learning appears somewhat naïve:

> but after when I finished my IELTS test, push out everything and concentrate on the medicine

Igor is so preoccupied with his ultimate goal of resuming work as a surgeon, that he appears to direct little effort to defining his language learning goals in more detail. Indeed, he is impatient to achieve his ends, and so states:

> yeah but ah maybe I want to get um very quickly very high skills about speaking

Yet he displays no ability to analyse what those speaking skills might involve in different situations or how they might develop, and the advisor's reaction:

> mm hmm I don't think that you can improve your speaking skills very quickly I don't think it's possible yeah

elicits no response.

The final area of Igor's beliefs revealed in the interview relates to his strategic knowledge. He appears to believe in the usefulness of a number of strategies, reporting on both form-focused (analytic) activities, such as working with a teacher friend on dictation and writing tasks, and the meaning-focused (experiential) activities of attending meetings already discussed. Indeed the interview is motivated by his search for additional strategies to improve his speaking skills. What the previous discussion suggests however, is that Igor's consideration of any strategies is filtered by his beliefs about personal factors, what constitute suitable topics and conversation partners, and relevance to his long-term goal.

5 Conclusion

What does this discussion suggest the three learners have in common, and what questions does it raise regarding the role and process of dialogue about learning? The main point to make about these learners is that they are all guided by a goal of some kind. To call the goal simply a language learning goal is, however, to miss an important point. The short term goal for each of them is to pass a test and be accredited by an institution, even though their long term goal might be to use the language effectively for real communication. The lack of integration of the long term communication goal, the short term assessment goal and the means of achieving them seems to be a productive aspect to explore. (It may even by a factor separating highly successful language learners from learners who struggle through courses.) If any generalisation at all can be made from only three case studies, it would be that goals occupy a central position in each of them. Making the goals explicit seems a useful basis for any subsequent discussion of strategic behaviour that might serve those goals.

Figure 1: Framework for Advisory Sessions

Dialogue Agenda	Monitoring (by advisor)	Learner Outcomes
Unfold the problem	learner's acknowledgement of elements of problem	expanded representation of problem
Establish goals	learner's statement of goals	commitment to more specific goals

Explore beliefs	learner's engagement in (explicit) discussion of beliefs	heightened awareness of own beliefs

Analysis of the dialogues suggests that an advisor needs to attend to at least three things (see Figure 1): unfolding the problem, establishing the learner's goals and exploring their beliefs about language learning. In an effective advisory session, each of these would be monitored by the advisor in an attempt to prompt an elaborated statement of the learner's problem and goals, and a discussion of relevant language learning beliefs. The immediate effectiveness of the session could be measured by how well the learners represent the problem, how committed they are to specific goals, and how aware they are of their beliefs about language learning.

It is relatively easy to prescribe a focus on goals and task difficulties and the beliefs underpinning choices that a learner might make. However, it is more problematic to be sure of whether the dialogue has prompted successful learning behaviour in the longer term. What would count as evidence that the dialogue had initiated change? Obviously a follow-up account is needed - ideally a longitudinal study of dialogue taking place over a longer period of time. Such a study would record what action had been taken by a learner and to what extent that action might have been prompted by dialogue (as opposed simply to further experience of language learning). Evidence of this might include learners' statements of new perceptions or appropriate learning activities, and later attribution of any subsequent action to the dialogue.

A final consideration is the context of the dialogue. In this case, the dialogue was one-to-one with an advisor and was initiated by learners who felt they had difficulties in achieving adequate performance. A learning dialogue can also take place between a teacher in an advisory role and a group of students; although the dynamic is different, the purpose and potential outcomes of the dialogue are the same. We believe that further research into this form of teacher-student interaction will reveal not only more about the self-management of language learning but also about the ways in which it can be enhanced through talk.

1 'Task' here is used to refer generally to a problematic activity - in this case not a pedagogical task but the higher level task of learning a language.

2 This assumes that language learning is comparable to other types of problem solving.

3 All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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